

HOMILY SUNDAY 20 - A

“Pray for Faith; Claim your Healing”

(Isaiah 56:1, 6-7; Psalm 67; Romans 11:13-15; 29-32; Matthew 15:21-28)

Here is one person’s creative version of the Bible in 50 words: God made, Adam bit, Noah arked, Abraham split, Joseph ruled, Jacob fooled, bush talked, Moses balked, Pharaoh plagued, people walked, sea divided, tablets guided, promise landed, Saul freaked, David peeked, prophets warned, Jesus born, God walked, love talked, anger crucified, Hope died, Love rose, Spirit flamed, Word spread, God remained.

How strong is your faith?

Pray for the faith of the Canaanite woman, and claim your healing.

The first reading from the prophet Isaiah opens us up to a God who works in the lives of all peoples who have faith in Him; the foreigners who attach themselves to him and trust him. They are promised salvation, deliverance and joy if they maintain justice and do what is right.

The gospel dramatizes that reality. Jesus moves into pagan, gentile land, and encounters a Canaanite woman who amazes him with her faith in him. That faith makes her a “foreigner who attaches herself to the Lord.” She first addresses him as ‘Son of David’, and Jesus does not respond, for as Son of David, he was sent to Israel. But when she addresses him as Lord (his universal title), he feels free to respond to her, for she has addressed him according to her situation as a gentile. Her prayer and posture echoes that of Peter walking on the water, “Lord, save me,” and kneeling on the sand, “Depart from me, Lord, I am a sinful man.” Her faith is humble, persevering faith; she doesn’t give up.

What is scary is the lack of faith of the disciples, who for the third time are portrayed as preventing people from coming to Jesus, and actually pushing them away. How often do we do that in the way we live our faith? Jesus, on the other hand, though sent only to the Jewish people, reaches out to anyone who has faith in him.

Another cause for concern is people of the house of Israel. Though they were given the law and the prophets, they were spiritually lost and would reject the Messiah when he came. Paul, in the second reading, feels agony at the disobedience of his own people, yet has hope that God will use their sin to help the gentiles. There is a warning here for us. How often do we let our religion become religiosity, merely formalism, words and actions that do not touch our heart and stir our emotions, and basically trap us in a static, status quo, type of controlled, rigid, pious practice which does nothing to really free us or others?

How different for the Canaanite woman, whose persistent faith leads to her daughter being healed of a demon – not just a physical sickness, but a demon. What are our demons today? False pride, fear, control, need for power, lust, addictions of all kinds? We need to deal with our demons, and to do so with the faith of the Canaanite woman.

John O'Shea, in his commentary on this gospel, shares a story about Betty Williams, the 1977 Nobel Peace Prize Laureate from Northern Ireland. He holds her up as an example of someone who is prayerful in the way Moses was when his arms were supported by Aaron and Hur during a desert battle for survival. She witnessed the bombing death of children one afternoon. A little girl died in her arms. The force of the bomb had severed the girl's legs and blown them across the street from where she held the bleeding child. Williams went home in shock and despair. Later that night, when the shock had worn off, the full impact of what she had seen struck her. She stepped outside her door and screamed into the night. Shouting at both God and the world, she moved from house to house, pounding on doors that could easily have opened with weapons pointing at her face. "What kind of people have we become that children are blown to bits on our streets?" she howled to all who would listen. Within hours the town was awake and in a short time 16,000 signatures were on petitions for peace. Betty Williams is Moses with her hands raised between heaven and earth in prayer. In protest: the staff of God is lifted up once again. Once again the widow is making her case in a world that seems to have neither fear of God nor respect for humanity.

The Eucharist we celebrate today is an act of great faith – to believe that these humble gifts become the body and blood of Jesus and that in participating with faith, we can be healed of our demons, transformed into his Body, and sent to share our faith and love with all we met.

Jesus was amazed at the faith of the Canaanite woman. May this Eucharist deepen our faith in Jesus so that we might experience his healing in our lives and in our communities.